

264. *Count Alexander Grigorevitch Stroganoff* 1825/30

I must say that I was in no mood for paying my homage to a great man when, a few hours after arriving in Weimar, I had our cards handed in at the house of Geheimrat von Goethe. Being of a serious nature and having—I confess it frankly—a certain inborn pride, I have always considered it rather humiliating that men who are neither our masters nor our benefactors should receive reverence from us merely on account of their talents or general merits. I should myself just as little relish this sort of homage if I possessed any other distinction than that of my outward station in life, which is the gift of chance fortune

exactly as all great talents and natural endowments are. In addition, Goethe's works have never inspired in me any feeling resembling admiration. His pithy sayings, his good humour, his deep insight into human nature, have often evoked in my mind a strong impulse of assent; but this assent had little in it that was flattering to humanity, and I took pleasure in only a few of his works. Most of the others, especially the much discussed *Wilhelm Meister*, have always been quite repugnant to me. Goethe is admirable when he achieves concentration in his language and in his treatment of a subject, as he does in *Faust*; it is true that the latter strongly recalls the inimitable example of Shakespeare, nevertheless there is still a great originality in it, which makes him a phenomenon of world importance. But it is when he expands and begins to analyse and elaborate and circumscribe that I have come to find him quite repulsive, with his cold complacent circumstantial way of listening to himself, his disingenuous intertwining of trivial threads of thought, his imitative reconstructions, as crafty as any goldsmith, of feelings he has never felt. It is true that I have often heard these very qualities which I so dislike extolled by the Germans in hyperbolic phrases; but I have come to know the national German vice of sentimentality too well to let myself be misled by their disagreement with me. There is no other nation in the world that could take such pleasure in the whimsical sentimental babblings of its writers, and the most conclusive proof of this is that they have in fact not been translated into any foreign language. This being my view of Goethe's work I naturally, despite my respect for his great intellect, felt none at all of the enthusiasm and admiration which were displayed, as I often had occasion to observe, by the special sect of hysterical devotees of this national deity. I had the honour of being pressingly recommended to him by the chief members of this literary clique. They appeared to have made it their serious purpose to proselytise an unbeliever like myself, but in this they had hitherto so signally failed that I should not have been much put out if Goethe had found some polite pretext for declining my visit. What increased my ill humour still further was the fact that German notabilities of every kind expect even foreigners, and indeed foreigners above all, to conform to a ceremonious etiquette which to me was very irksome, for I disliked changing out of my comfortable travelling clothes. My lighthearted brother took this more easily in his stride, and when we finally received the invitation to visit

Goethe, he scented himself and did his hair as carefully as if he were about to pay a morning call on some beautiful woman. Feeling a little apprehensive that Alexei's high spirits might get us into trouble, but to some extent reassured by my knowledge of his well-tryed social adroitness, I drove with him to Goethe's villa. Our first visit was received in a very stiff and formal manner; the pomposity of the Saxon servants and the measured gravity of our host himself greatly appealed to my brother's sense of humour. Goethe's personality is well known; for his admirers have described it so fully that there is nothing left for any foreigner to say about it. He was rightly reputed to be a very well-built man with expressive features, but so far as his manners were concerned, I found them more German than ever and far removed from the more subtle and charming court etiquette which prevails in the highest circles in my own country.

Alexei thought Goethe's pride deeply grounded in his whole nature, though I, with my more thorough knowledge of his work, questioned this. I found his outward haughtiness no less of a contradiction than the degree of deference with which he received us, in consideration of our rank as Russian noblemen. This man, I reflected, cannot possibly have either so high an opinion of himself as would justify his pride, or so great a respect for us, whose rank betokens no merit. The sequel showed that I had judged Goethe's character correctly.

The conversation I had with him at my farewell visit was as remarkable and unforgettable as our first exchanges had been trivial and insignificant. On the previous evening he entertained a large company, obviously for the sole purpose of letting his native admirers see such rare birds as a pair of Russians from the Crimea, who had read and understood his works. We, and especially my high-spirited brother Alexei, had been casting him in the role of a remarkable tourist curiosity, but in the meantime he very skilfully contrived to make us objects of curiosity ourselves: we were besieged on all sides by the strangest enquiries about the manners and usages of our country and could scarcely draw breath to answer them. Allusions were made, with all due delicacy, to Russian despotism, and there was a full display of the usual assortment of confused notions about our system of serfdom and similar matters. In this cultivated circle I of course encountered some people who were very well informed—and Goethe's own knowledge was indeed considerable—but they viewed the whole thing from a mistaken standpoint;

and in consequence there developed between myself and the other guests a polite dispute, in the course of which my patriotic ardour was quite misunderstood by these strangers and I came to appear as a champion of the detested serfdom in my attempts to explain to them the patriarchal way of life of the Russian people.

Goethe remained more or less neutral during all this, but was visibly amused by our discussion and seemed to be gloating over our embarrassment. To take my revenge on him for this trick, I managed to force the conversation round to the subject of his works. I deliberately questioned him on the most delicate points with a boldness which at once gave me an advantage over everyone else present. I raised problems which had often been stoutly debated by the learned gentlemen of Germany, whom the lofty master had never condescended to assist out of their perplexity. I was seconded in this by my brother, who no sooner gave offence by his lively roguish manner than he made amends by his good nature. How was the *Westöstlicher Divan* to be interpreted? What did *Faust* mean? What philosophical idea underlay his work?—All this was discussed as openly and unabashedly as if Goethe had been a hundred miles away. He, however, remained quite unperturbed by this indiscretion; for it was, as I later heard, by no means a new experience for him. He was content to answer with a smile and a few equivocal phrases, and to leave the talking to a professor from Leipzig or Jena who was present and whose name I have forgotten. This man had made it the chief business of his life to interpret Goethe's works, and he now set himself to answer our enquiries in the most circumstantial manner. He did so with such profusion of unintelligible hocus-pocus, philosophical jargon and scholarly platitudes as would have reduced any other foreigner to consternation. It struck me as not unlikely that Goethe, who kept encouraging this insufferable windbag with smiles of approval, made use of him as a means of warding off importunate questioners without committing himself. And indeed, as a tool for this purpose he was remarkably well chosen; for it was as hard to get in a word through the continuous drone of this walking philosophical machine as it was to make it a suitable answer if one had not read the vast pile of books and periodicals whose contents the doctor carried in his head. As I understood not a word of his mumbo-jumbo, I requested him, with an air of edification, to translate the gist of his long discourse into

French for my benefit, since I had not the good fortune to be very familiar with the recent enrichment of the German language by thousands of debased Greek, Latin and French words and especially by the technical terms of Berlin philosophy. But the learned professional glossmonger and panegyricist informed me roundly that it was impossible to discuss this great master in any language but German. While I was treating this assertion with duly polite irreverence, Goethe had left the room; but I am convinced that he listened through a side door to the end of my discussion with the professor. I concluded the dispute by declaring that it was impossible for the opposing parties to reach any mutual understanding when they set out from points of view so totally divergent; for whereas the learned doctor was convinced that other nations were quite incapable of judging Goethe's genius and his philosophical and moral influence on his age, I was equally inclined to agree with Lord Byron and his fellow-countrymen in their opinion that no nation in the world has so completely misunderstood Goethe as the Germans.

No sooner had I humbly uttered this bold proposition than Goethe came in, looking unembarrassed but serious, and invited the guests to move to another room for supper. His behaviour towards me seemed to express a certain annoyance at the poor compliment I had paid the German people; but he occasionally glanced across at me, as if surreptitiously, in a manner that betokened no resentment. Despite this, the conversation remained strained, and I left with the feeling that I had offended the company, and particularly my host, and wounded the national pride of both. But I was soon disabused of this; and having the occasion later on to speak individually to a number of those who had been present, I found to my great astonishment that my words, which in Russia or France or England would have been counted against me as little short of a deadly insult, had perhaps displeased no one except the pretentious professor himself. All the others assured me that unfortunately there was much truth in what I had said, though each regarded himself as an exception to it. I must confess however that I would have preferred to hear them defend their national errors against a foreigner.

Next morning I received a note addressed to me in Goethe's own hand, with my Christian and family names, in which he invited me in very polite terms to come for a drive with him. Although surprised by this unexpected courtesy, I nevertheless

accepted, and an hour later I was alone with the great man in a carriage. It was a beautiful morning, and the vigorous old man seemed to take a fresh lease of life and youth in the spring air. His face was radiant with unusual good humour and his eyes shone with an inner vitality moderated, aged as he was, only by his manly composure. After greeting me, he said with an air of flattering familiarity: "Yesterday, Count, you were so negligent as to let fall a number of valuables such as we Germans usually take better care not to waste, and they have made me very much desire the closer acquaintance of so rich a man". "And to what riches of mine", I asked, "can your Excellency's interest refer?" "To that of your ideas", he replied. I bowed my thanks for this compliment, for which there seemed to me to be insufficient reason. "Sans compliments, my dear Count!" he continued, anticipating the utterance of my thought. "I often have occasion to distinguish between the applause of commonplace persons and that recognition by men of judgment which is the only truly honouring tribute. So you need not hesitate to credit me with the ability to see beyond the most unpromising appearances in speech and behaviour, and to discern the man who has a mind of his own. I find myself in the same position as Voltaire, who longed for nothing more ardently than to be recognised by those who refused him their praise. You will tell me that you are not one who refuses to praise me, but by even appearing to hold a view that runs counter to public opinion—the correctness of which you questioned yesterday—you show me that you are a man of independent mind and character; for only such a man dares to contradict where everyone else is in agreement. I leave it to you to decide whether I have judged you rightly." I replied that his judgment was too flattering for me to be able simply to confirm it, but that I was inclined in all modesty to doubt that to a man so great and who enjoyed world fame the opinion of a travelling cavalier and commonplace sightseer could possibly be of the very slightest importance. This opening led to a highly interesting discussion of the reputation, significance and fortunes of Goethe's works, and the poet spoke his mind with a most engaging frankness which allowed me to see into the innermost recesses of his character. Immediately after our excursion I made the following summary of his most important remarks, intending to publish them at a later date, when after the death of the speaker I should no longer be bound in any way by obligations of discretion.

Here are his words : disconnected, rhapsodical, abbreviated, and set down as faithfully as memory can record them.

"Fame, my dear Count, is a fine spiritual food : it strengthens and elevates the mind and revives the soul; no wonder the weak heart of man relishes this refreshment. But the path of renown soon leads us to despise it. Public opinion deifies men and blasphemes gods; it often commends the faults we blush for and scorns the virtues that are our pride. Believe me : fame is almost as insulting as ill-repute. For the last thirty years I have been fighting a vexation of spirit which you would understand if you could be with me for even a few weeks to see how every day a number of foreigners demand to be allowed to admire me, many of whom have not read my works—nearly all the French and English, for example—and most of whom do not understand me. The meaning and the significance of my works and of my life is the vindication of essential humanity. That is why I never turn my back on man, and always enjoy such fame as good fortune has granted me, but I taste a sweeter reward in my understanding of wholesome human qualities. That is why I value even the adverse criticism of those who have grasped the true human meaning of art more highly than the sickly enthusiasm of our hysterical German poets under whose phrases I am smothered; and that is why I am most willing to concede the truth, in a certain sense, of your remark that Germany has misunderstood me. There prevails among the Germans a spirit of sensuous hysteria which to me has an alien flavour : art and philosophy have been detached from life and have become something abstract, remote from the fountainheads of nature which should nourish them. I like German ideas, they are a real part of the national life, and I enjoy wandering in their labyrinths, but only if I am constantly accompanied by living, natural things. I rank life higher than art, for art is only the embellishment of life.

"You are right : Byron understood me perfectly, and I think I understand him. I value his judgment as highly as he honoured mine; but I never had the good fortune to hear his opinion of me in its entirety." This remark, spoken with a particular emphasis, revealed to me quite clearly the main reason for the interest which Goethe appeared to be taking in my conversation. On the previous evening I had let fall a few words about Byron which not only disclosed my fairly intimate acquaintanceship with that remarkable man, but also suggested that I had perhaps

had the opportunity of enquiring quite closely into his opinion of Goethe. I had in fact, in Venice, on repeated occasions had the good fortune to enjoy an intimate association with Byron, after succeeding with some difficulty in dispelling, at least so far as I myself was concerned, his prejudice against all Russians, which was intensified at that time by the Greek troubles. Strangely enough, it was not exactly my good qualities that reconciled him to my nationality, but my wild youthful character, for in those days I was one who exploited life and art with the hottest appetite, intent only on pleasure and caring little for the enlargement of my talents and knowledge. Our association was not one of like-minded connoisseurs of art, but a partnership of exuberant and insatiable *bons viveurs*. In this way, however, I learnt a number of particular details of Byron's private life, and Goethe listened with the keenest interest to my recital of these, which served to interrupt my host's self-analytical discourse only to furnish it with fresh materials. It had, moreover, been Byron's habit to interlard our constant discussions of beautiful women, whom we both zealously pursued, with interesting aesthetic digressions: in this way he had confided his literary views to me and qualified me to satisfy Goethe's curiosity. I therefore told the latter that I had, indeed, the good fortune to be able to give him some information about Byron's views on him, and I delivered a résumé of my conversations with Byron about art and literature, such that Goethe was in fact its main topic, and the discussion of this necessarily led him further in his interesting description of himself. The account I gave was not entirely frank and disinterested, since I was debarred by considerations of propriety and good taste from doing more than conveying Byron's views as distinct from his actual remarks; for most of the latter were of a kind that might easily have displeased Goethe, despite Byron's considerable good will towards him. He had, for example, often spoken with more humour than reverence of Goethe's hypocrisy, and once said of him: "He's an old fox who won't leave his hole, and preaches a fine sermon from inside it". His *Elective Affinities* and *Sorrows of Werther* he described as a mockery of marriage, such as his familiar spirit Mephistopheles himself could scarcely have written better; the endings of both these novels, said Byron, were the non plus ultra of irony. However, my memories of what Byron had said about Goethe furnished me with so much flattering material that I could, without fearing to offend him, also drop



some hints as to the points on which Byron's opinions had differed from his. Goethe was so gratified by this that he continued the conversation with unwonted cordiality, and its one topic preoccupied his thoughts all that day.

Since I had many opportunities of making clear to him my interpretation of his philosophy, I did so quite candidly, and it appeared to give him particular pleasure, as he found that it was confirmed by Byron's judgment by which he set great store. Matters were mentioned which I am sure Goethe has never dared to repeat. I made a remark to this effect, and he confessed with a smile that he had no wish to contradict my forecast. "But now that we are talking frankly", he said, "I will confess to you that I have put the gist of all we have talked about into the Second Part of my *Faust*, and I am therefore quite certain that after my death this conclusion of the poem will be declared by my fellow-countrymen to be the most tedious thing I ever wrote."

And lo and behold! a few years after this conversation there fell into my hands, together with the second volume of *Faust*, a well-known German newspaper in which I read the following words: "Just as this book has physically appeared after the end of Goethe's bodily life, so also its intellectual content has survived his genius".